

A Guide to Spinal Injections

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What is a Spinal Injection?

The spinal injection you will have is also known as a “block”. Following your evaluation with Dr. Zaman, a determination will be made using objective findings, such as your physical examination, test results (EMG, lab work), and radiology studies (MRI, x-rays, etc.), as well as subjective information (the actual symptoms and pain you are experiencing), as to whether or not an injection procedure is appropriate, and if so, which one.

The injection is performed under x-ray guidance, also known as fluoroscopy. This enables Dr. Zaman to visualize your spine to ensure accurate needle placement. The benefits of having the injection done under x-ray guidance are reduced risk of complication and improved chances of positive results. Published reports have shown that blind injections (without x-ray guidance) deposit medication in the wrong place 25-40% of the time.

What Medications Are Used During the Procedure?

Medications injected include local anesthetic such as lidocaine (to numb the area), contrast agent or dye (to outline the structures in your spine), and steroid (the medication to reduce inflammation and swelling, and decrease your pain). You should report any known allergy to any of these substances to Dr. Zaman and his staff. If the allergy is to the contrast agent, or if you have a reaction to seafood, shellfish, or iodine, you may need an allergy preparation prior to your injection, and Dr. Zaman, may modify the contrast agent which he chooses to utilize.

Are There Different Types of Injections?

A variety of injections are performed by Dr. Zaman and each one is directed at specific structures in your spine, and sometimes elsewhere as well. All of the injections fall under two general categories: diagnostic block (test injection where only a contrast agent and local anesthetic agent are used), and therapeutic blocks (where steroids are added to the above).

The steroids used in therapeutic injections do not build muscle; they are not the kind of steroid that body builders and athletes take. The purpose of these steroids is to reduce inflammation and swelling, thereby reducing pain. The effect of the steroid usually begins between 4 to 6 hours to one week after your therapeutic steroid injection. Injections procedures are not meant to be a “quick fix”. The injections performed are only one component of a total rehabilitation program. They are used in conjunction with a physical therapy and medication regimen to maximize the probability of a good outcome. You should continue doing everything you were instructed to on your previous visits unless told otherwise by Dr. Zaman or a staff member.

A diagnostic block is only required when the source of your pain has not been clearly identified. As the name implies, a diagnostic block assists in making the proper diagnosis. A diagnostic block is not intended to cure your problem. Fortunately, with the technology available today, diagnostic blocks are necessary infrequently. In order to be effective, the diagnostic injection can only be performed when you are in your usual discomfort.

Shortly after your injection, you will be assessed by a member of Dr. Zaman's team, to determine if you have had any relief of your usual discomfort. You will be asked to give a percentage of pain relief. If your pain is gone, this is 100%, if your pain is unchanged this is 0%. Once the anesthetic has worn off, within an hour or two, your usual pain will likely return, and in some instances, you may have a temporary flare-up of discomfort.

What Can I Expect?

The most common side effect of this procedure is a transient increase in pain for the first 24-73 hours after the injection. This typically occurs because the substances injected are placed in a location where there is already inflammation. You should not be alarmed by this. Your symptoms should gradually diminish in the days following the injection procedure.

There may also be some tenderness at the needle insertion site. If so, you may place an ice pack on the area to reduce the discomfort as often as you require.

The above side effects are not reasons to cancel subsequent injections. Your subsequent injections (if scheduled) should only be cancelled if you have 90-100% symptom relief, on a consistent basis, which lasts up to the day prior to your next injection. You should call Dr. Zaman's office, if this is the case, to determine if your procedure should be cancelled.

Can All Spine Problems be Treated by an Injection Procedure?

The procedures Dr. Zaman performs are not appropriate for everyone. It is conceivable your condition cannot be treated by non-surgical measures. If this applies to your situation, surgical consultation may be recommended. Likewise, if there are no medical remedies for your condition, you will be apprised of that opinion at the time of your initial evaluation by Dr. Zaman.

Should I Do Anything to Prepare for the Procedure?

You will need to have a driver on the day of your procedure. Be sure to arrange for this. Prior to your injection, be sure to have a light meal, such as toast and cereal, or soup and a sandwich. Avoid caffeinated products. You may take your regularly scheduled medications, however there are a few exceptions. Hold any anticoagulants, such as coumadin, heparin, plavix, lovenox, aggrenox or ticlopidine. Only if you are having a diagnostic injection hold your pain medications on the day of the procedure. Please call Dr. Zaman's staff if you have questions or concerns. These are very important issues.

What are the Potential Complications?

As with any invasive procedure, there are possible complications you may experience. These include allergic reaction, infection, excessive bleeding, paralyses, lightheadedness, permanent nerve damage, dural puncture, seizure, cardiovascular collapse, headache, fainting, and death. A recent review of 888 injections during a 6 month interval demonstrated 8 short-term and no long term complications. The issues mentioned above are exceedingly rare. If you have any additional questions about the potential risk factors, Dr. Zaman or his staff will be happy to discuss them with you.

For What Reasons Should I Call Dr. Zaman's Office?

A temperature of 101 degrees or more, excruciating pain, lost bowel or bladder control, loss of motor function in areas or legs, headache in the standing or sitting position, which is fully relieved by lying down.